



MINNESOTA SAFE LEARNING SURVEY

Winter 2021 survey of Minnesota
educators, families, and students

April 2021



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION + HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION

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Appendix A: Communications with survey respondents [\[Link\]](#)

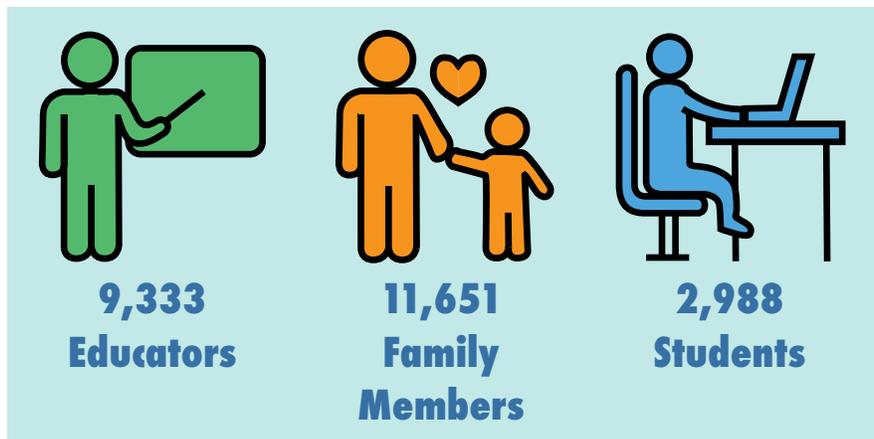
Appendix B: Full text of survey..... [\[Link\]](#)

Context

In response to the continued coronavirus or COVID-19 pandemic, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz signed [Executive Order 20-82](#) on July 30, 2020 directing schools to use a localized, data-driven approach to operate schools across the state. The plan strived to prioritize safe learning for all Minnesota students and provide flexibility for school districts and charter schools to adapt their learning model based on the prevalence of COVID-19 cases in their area. Between August 2020 and January 2021, schools have moved in and out of different modes of learning based on data in their region and exposure to COVID-19 within their communities or schools. Since then, so long as all mitigation measures were in place, Governor Walz encouraged schools to move to in-person instruction starting with elementary schools as early as January 18, 2021 and continuing with middle and high schools as soon as February 22, 2021.

The Wisconsin-Minnesota Comprehensive Center ([WMCC](#))—housed at the University of Minnesota’s ([UMN](#)) Center for Applied Research & Educational Improvement ([CAREI](#)), the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative ([WEC](#)), and Education Analytics ([EA](#))—works directly with the Minnesota Department of Education ([MDE](#)) on specific projects to benefit students and educators across the state of Minnesota. In the spring of 2020, the WMCC gathered information about districts’ and individuals’ experiences with distance learning by conducting focus groups with a variety of stakeholders (a total of 25 sessions with 153 participants) and completing a systematic review of a sample of over 250 district distance learning plans from across the state. Information from these sources, as well as a wealth of information from educators collected through the [University of Minnesota’s Spring 2020 Minnesota PK-12 Distance Learning Survey](#), was used to inform the WMCC’s decision to develop a statewide survey to gather longitudinal feedback regarding the state’s [Safe Learning Plan](#) amid the continued navigation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The WMCC developed the Minnesota Safe Learning Survey to examine educators’ students’ (grades 6-12), and families’ educational experiences during the first half of the 2020-21 academic year. The purpose of this survey was to get a true picture of how those being most impacted by the Safe Learning Plan are experiencing it. The survey will be deployed at three intervals, February, May, and October 2021, with statewide reports following the conclusion of each survey window. This is the first of three



reports that will be produced. This information will inform future MDE planning and support that the WMCC and the UMN's College of Education and Human Development may be able to provide MDE, policymakers, districts, and schools.

Over 23,000 respondents, including 9,333 educators, 2,988 students, and 11,651 family members completed the survey between February 8 and February 26, 2021. Although the survey was sent statewide via school and district leaders, somewhat uneven and concentrated responses, both geographically and by respondent type, were observed. This was perhaps a result of not all school and district leaders sharing the survey with educators, students, and families. Some school and district leaders cited survey fatigue as a reason for not sharing the survey. Another reason that school and district leaders may have opted to not share the survey was that many districts were in the process of transitioning from distance learning to hybrid and in-person learning following Governor Walz's announcement at the end of January that schools could begin transitioning back into in-person learning.

It is the hope of the WMCC that data from the Minnesota Safe Learning Surveys will continue to provide insights as to how educators, students, and families are feeling about school during this unprecedented time in history.

Key Findings

» Students learned.

Educators, families, and students agreed that students learned during the first half of the 2020–21 school year. Though the extent to which students were learning was perceived to be lower than pre-pandemic times, there was consensus that students were learning more this winter compared to distance learning in the spring of 2020.



Educators reported they felt there was more academic learning happening than social emotional learning.



Families reported they felt there were higher rates of learning for their early childhood and elementary students than secondary students.



Students in grades 6-12 reported they felt they were learning at higher rates than families with students in grades 6-12 reported.

» Support for mental health is needed.

Addressing mental health was identified as both a challenge and an area in need of support by all respondent groups.



Educators in all roles agreed that the mental health of students and staff was among the top challenges.

Administrators reported that supporting student and staff mental health was their number one challenge.

Teachers and support professionals cited taking care of their own mental health as their primary challenge and supporting students' mental health as one of their top three challenges.

Mental health supports for students and families was also the third greatest support needed for teachers and support professionals, after their own workload and engagement of disengaged students (both of which are also tied to educators' and students' mental health).



Families reported supporting their students' mental health as being one of their top five challenges and an area in need of support.



Students reported that getting help with their mental health was the third greatest challenge they experienced. Students cited keeping up with schoolwork as their second-highest challenge, which may also impact their overall mental health.

» Engaging students in learning was both successful and challenging.

Respondents across all groups shared that they had some positive experiences related to engagement, connection, and communication with others. However, engaging students in learning remained one of the highest needs.

Successes



Engaging students in learning was cited as the second most prominent success among teachers. Support professionals reported relationship building and connection with students as their top success.



Feelings of connectedness to others varied by group, though most reported strong connections to teachers and between teachers and students. Families with younger students felt more connected to their students' teachers than those with middle and high school students.

Communication received by educators, families, and students largely met their needs, though there was room for growth in the scope of the content provided to families and in the clarity of communication provided to students.

Challenges



Teachers also reported that engaging students in learning was among their top challenges and an area in need of support.

Administrators reported that ensuring student attendance was the second largest challenge for them. Most administrators reported that between 0% and 20% of students/families were disengaged from classes/school.



Families reported supporting their children's learning at home as the largest challenge and that they most needed support with keeping their students engaged in learning.



Students reported that understanding what they learned and keeping up with their schoolwork were the top challenges they experienced. Students also reported that their top priority for needed support was clearer communication from school staff.

» Successes were reported in technology and COVID-19 safety measures.

Use of and access to reliable technology was cited as an area of success among educators, families, and students. In addition, there was agreement among all respondent groups that ensuring the health and safety of students and staff was an area of success. Both technology and COVID-19 safety measures were reported less prominently as areas of needed support.



Compared to results from the [University of Minnesota's Spring 2020 Minnesota PK-12 Distance Learning Survey](#) and spring 2020 focus groups conducted by the UMN, where technology was cited as an area where educators and families needed support, technology in the winter of 2021 was reported to be among the greatest successes and least significant challenges for all educators, families, and students.

Ensuring health and safety was reported among the top three successes for all respondent groups. This finding may relate to varied and shifting modes of learning across the state addressed in the initial design of the Safe Learning Plan.

Reinforcing the success of technology and COVID-19 safety measures, educators and families reported that communication largely met their needs in these areas.

» The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey will be distributed again in May 2021 and October 2021. We hope all of Minnesota's educational leaders will help in distributing subsequent surveys to educators, families, and students in their district or school.

» District and charter school reports for each data collection period are available to superintendents or charter leaders upon request.

Methodology

Survey development

The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey was developed by educational researchers at the WMCC, who worked in close partnership with the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) to develop, test, and disseminate this survey. This process included using results from other recent statewide surveys to inform question development,¹ as well as gathering and integrating feedback from focus groups conducted with a variety of stakeholders, including educational leaders, teachers, families, and students.

Seeking respondents

Attempting to secure respondents from a variety of groups (i.e., educators, students, and families), the WMCC used multiple forms of outreach. Using contact lists from the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), Minnesota School Board Association (MSBA), and Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the WMCC sent an email on February 1, 2021 to 2,846 Superintendents, Charter School Leaders, School Board Chairs, and Principals across the state of Minnesota, inviting them to share the survey link with all educators, families of students, and students (grades 6–12) in their district or school (see [Appendix A](#) for communication sent to educational leaders). This email stated that the survey would be open from February 8–26, 2021, participation was voluntary, and results would be summarized in a statewide report, as well as an optional report of their district’s responses. The email also provided leaders with a preview version of the survey to review, language to use when distributing the survey among educators, families, and students (including text translated into Spanish, Somali, and Hmong for families and students), and a link to a list of [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about the survey.

The WMCC also sent a similar email to leaders of key educator and family advocacy organizations in Minnesota, including Education Minnesota, Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA), Minnesota Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP), Minnesota Elementary School Principals' Association (MESPA), Minnesota Administrators of Special Education (MASE), PACER Center, and Minnesota Youth Council (see full list of organizations in [Appendix A](#)). Leaders of these organizations were asked to consider distributing the survey among their members.

Education Minnesota represents 60,000 licensed and non-licensed educators across the state and distributed the link directly to their members. These educators were encouraged to complete the survey twice if they represented the roles of both educator and family.

1. e.g., [UMN’s Distance Learning Survey](#), [MDE’s Fall Planning Survey](#), [RAND’s Spring 2020 American Educator Panels COVID-19 Surveys](#), and [WMCC’s Wisconsin Distance Learning Survey for Students](#)

The link to the survey was also shared on Twitter several times throughout the survey window by CAREI, MDE, and affiliated organizations and individuals. A follow-up email was sent to the original distribution list on February 18, 2021 to further prompt educational leaders and organizations to distribute the survey.

Description of the survey

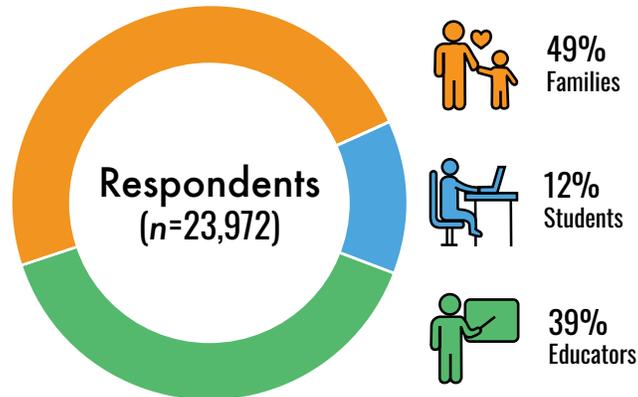
The Minnesota Safe Learning Survey asked respondents to answer questions addressing the following themes, with the number of questions depending on the type of respondent: Demographics (5–7 questions); Successes and Challenges (2–5 questions); Needed Supports (1 question); Learning (3–4 questions); Connectedness (1 question); and Communication (1–3 questions). Families were prompted to consider their overall experiences with schooling for all of their children when responding to questions about demographics, successes and challenges, and needed supports. They were asked to respond specifically about their experiences at each age level (early childhood, elementary, middle school/junior high, and high school) for questions about learning, connectedness, and communication. In total, educators responded to 16–18 questions, students responded to 15 questions, and families responded to 14–32 questions, depending on how many age levels their children represented. All questions (except for respondent type and educator role) were optional to answer, so response rates varied by question. The survey was estimated to take 5–10 minutes to complete and did not include any open-ended questions, though respondents were advised to email CAREI@umn.edu with any questions or comments. The main survey link led to a page where families and students could click a link to complete a Spanish, Somali, or Hmong version of the survey. The full text of the English version of the survey is available in [Appendix B](#).

Respondents

The MN Safe Learning Survey was completed a total of 23,972 times, and included responses from 9,333 educators, 2,988 students, and 11,651 family members. Of these respondents, 47 responded to the Spanish version of the survey (40 family members, 7 students) and no respondents completed the Somali or Hmong versions of the survey. Notably, there is likely some overlap in the number of educator and family respondents, as educators were prompted to respond to the survey twice if they had children in school, once as an educator and once as a family member.

Region

Educator respondents represented a total of 401 districts or charter schools, while families represented 362 districts or charter schools and students represented 122 districts or charter schools.² The highest proportion of educator responses came from those working in the Metro Educational Cooperative Service Unit (ECSU; 33%), the Southeast Service Cooperative (18%), and the Northwest Service Cooperative (7%) regions. Student respondents primarily attended schools in the Metro ECSU (40%), Resource Training & Solutions (23%), and Northwest Service Cooperative (15%) regions. The highest proportions of families had students attending schools in the Southeast Service Cooperative (36%), Metro ECSU (25%), and Resource Training & Solutions (13%) regions. As noted in the context section above, these uneven and concentrated response rates both within and across respondent types likely reflect the fact that only some districts and school leaders distributed the survey to all educators, students, and families in their school communities.



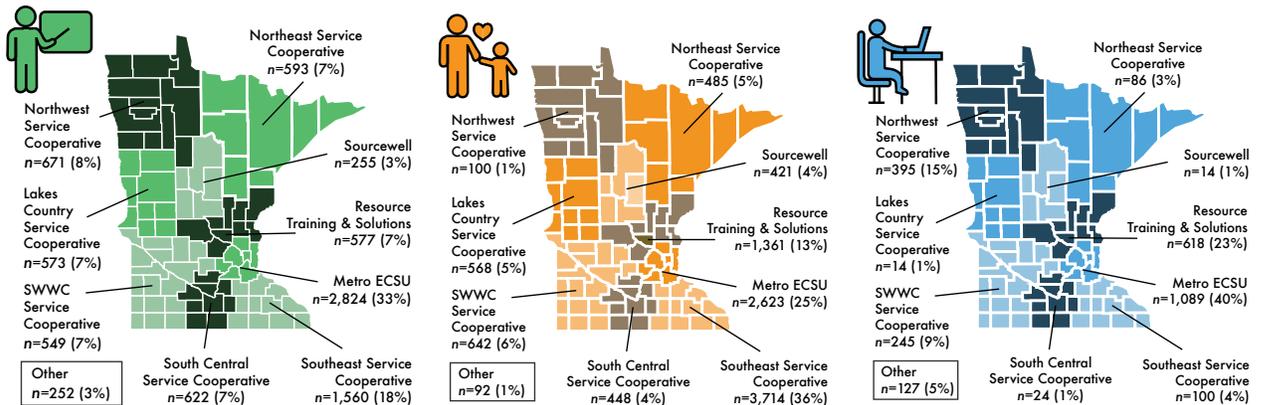
49% of respondents were families.

Demographics

Respondents were asked about a variety of demographic characteristics that would help to understand the perspectives of those who completed the survey. These characteristics included age/grade level(s) they worked with or that students represented, mode of learning they worked in or participated in (in-person only, hybrid, or distance-only), educator roles and experience levels, services students received in school, and race/ethnicity. Educators and students were asked to report their own race/ethnicity, while family members reported the

2. Region n's for families are slightly inflated due to families that selected multiple districts within the same region.

Survey Respondents by Region



Most family and educator respondents came from the Metro area or the Southeastern region of Minnesota. Most student respondents came from the Metro area or just north of the Metro area.

race/ethnicities that all of their students represented. All respondents could select multiple options on the race/ethnicity question. We specifically asked respondents about their race because although race is a social construct with no biological basis, there is widespread evidence that race does affect educators', students', and families' experiences in educational systems. In addition, we wanted to know the extent to which the survey respondents' racial and ethnic backgrounds were representative of the overall makeup of the state.

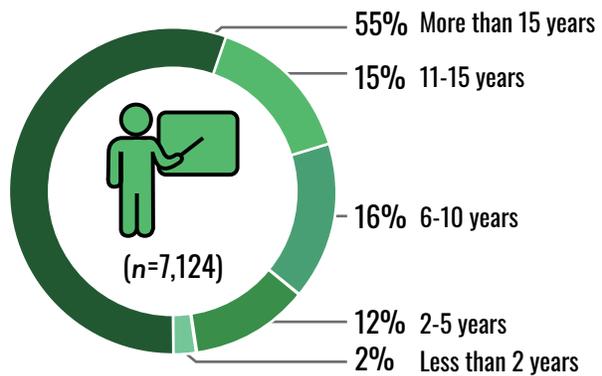
Educator respondents to the survey were primarily white general education teachers with more than 15 years of experience as an educator. Respondents serving elementary students were slightly more represented than other age groups, and only a small proportion of educator respondents worked in Early Childhood and Adult Basic Education settings. Educators were asked slightly different questions depending on the role they selected, so their responses are sometimes reported by subgroup in this report. The following terms will be used to describe each group of educator respondents throughout the report.

	Educators' race	Family reports of students' race	Students' race
Asian	65	326	69
American Indian or Alaska Native	53	116	54
Black or African American	46	252	81
Hispanic/Latino	84	309	127
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	10	29	13
White	6377	7120	1759
None of these apply to me	50	123	34
I prefer not to answer	525	743	187

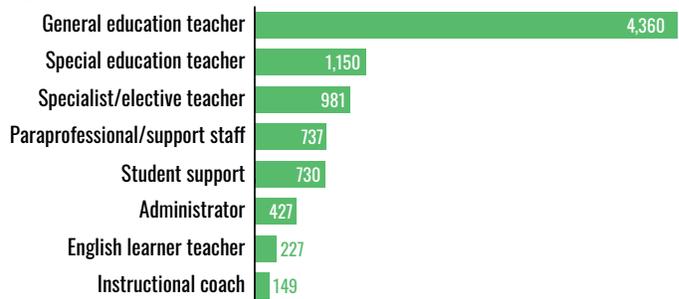
- **Administrators:** Respondents who chose administrator as their role. This includes those who serve in administrative leadership roles, such as superintendent, principal, assistant principal, directors and supervisors of special education, and various district-level roles.
- **Teachers:** Respondents who chose general education teacher, specialist/elective teacher (e.g., art, music, phy ed), special education teacher, and English learner teacher.
- **Support Professionals:** Respondents who chose instructional coach, paraprofessional/support staff, and student support (e.g., counselor, social work, school psychologist, speech/language pathologist, occupational therapist).

Family and student responses about student race/ethnicity indicated that most students represented in the survey were white. A slightly higher proportion of families had students in elementary school than other age groups, while student respondents were evenly spread across each grade level (grades 6–12). Most families reported that their students did not receive additional services in school. Those that did receive additional services primarily received support through special education or gifted and talented programming.

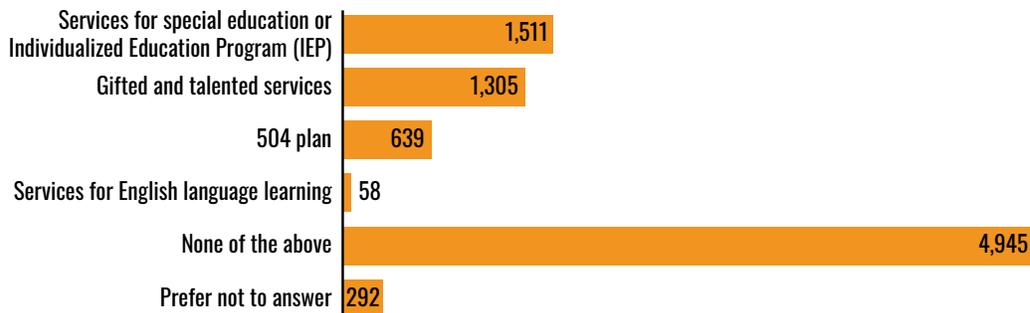
How long have you been an educator?



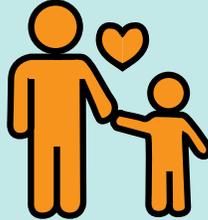
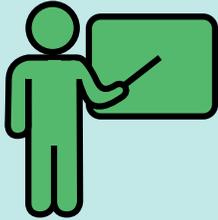
What is your role?



What services does your student receive, if any?



Survey Results



Mode of Learning

Respondents were asked which mode of learning (e.g., in-person, hybrid, distance) their district was in (administrators), what mode they were working in (teachers and support staff), or which mode their children (families) or they themselves (students) were in, as of the day they completed the survey. Notably, February 2021 was a time when many districts were shifting to different learning modes, as Governor Walz announced at the end of January 2021 that all schools (beginning with the youngest learners) could begin transitioning into in-person learning. As such, many respondents may have recently changed modes.

Administrators

Administrators ($n=416$) primarily reported that their district either offered in-person learning for elementary and hybrid learning for secondary students (37%) or in-person learning for all students (33%) at the time the survey was completed. Other administrators indicated that all students were in hybrid learning (8%), there was hybrid learning for elementary and distance learning for secondary students (6%), or that all students were in distance learning only (4%). A significant proportion of administrators (12%) selected **Other** in response to this question, with explanatory text indicating nuances such as working with specific populations in person (e.g., students with disabilities), all families having in-person learning as an option but many electing to remain in distance learning, and/or having shortened days or weeks.



37% of administrators reported their district was offering in-person learning for elementary and hybrid learning for secondary students.

Teachers and support professionals

Teachers and support professionals ($n=8,179$) reported that they were primarily teaching or working **in person** with students (32%) or in a **hybrid** model (31%). Others reported working in a **distance learning** mode only (23%) and many selected **other** (15%). Most educators who selected **other** reported that they were supporting students both in person and online, with many stating that they were doing so simultaneously by livestreaming lessons from the classroom.



63% of teachers and support professionals were working in person or in a hybrid model.

Students

Students (grades 6-12; $n=2,776$) primarily reported that they were learning in a hybrid model (43%), while others were in an in-person only model (36%) or distance learning only (22%).



43% of students (grades 6-12) were learning in a hybrid model.

Families

Families were asked to report on the mode of learning for their students at each age level. Overall, each mode of learning (in-person, hybrid, distance) was represented equally across the response options. However, for early childhood and elementary students, the highest proportion of families indicated having students in an in-person only model, while secondary students were primarily reported to be in distance learning only.



Early childhood and elementary school students were primarily learning in person.

Middle and high school students were primarily learning in a distance-only model.

Learning

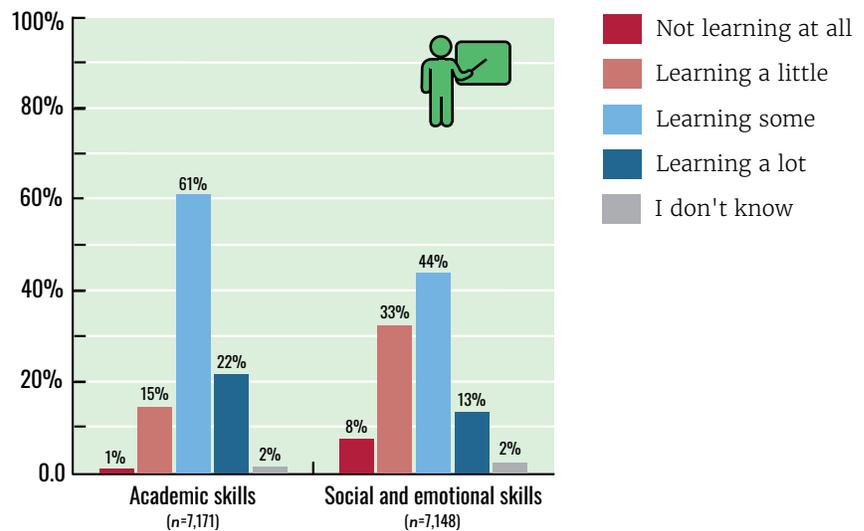


Educators, families, and students agreed that most students were learning some during the first half of the 2020-21 school year.

Educators

Educators were asked to estimate how much they believe their students were learning academic and social/emotional skills during the first half of the 2020–21 school year. For both types of learning, the largest proportion of educators reported that students were *learning some* (61% for academic skills, 44% for social and emotional skills). For academic skills, the next highest amount of educators (22%) reported that students were *learning a lot* of academic skills. In contrast, for social and emotional skills, the next highest percentage of educators (33%) reported that students were *learning a little*. More educators also reported that students were *not learning at all* in

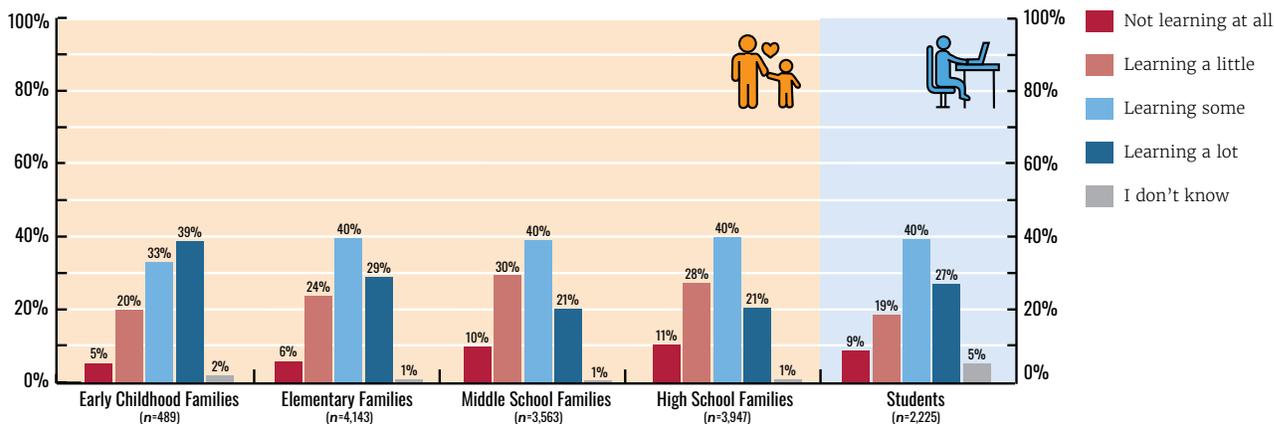
To what extent do you believe your students are learning academic and social/emotional skills this year?



There was more consensus among educators that students were learning academic versus social and emotional skills. **83%** of educators believed students were learning *some* or *a lot* of academic skills, whereas **57%** of educators believed students were learning *some* or *a lot* of social and emotional skills.

terms of social and emotional skills (8%) than those that reported students were *not learning at all* in terms of academic skills (1%). Similarly, nearly one-quarter of educators (22%) reported that students were *learning a lot* of academic skills, compared to only 13% who indicated that students were *learning a lot* of social and emotional skills.

To what extent do you believe you / your students are learning this school year?



Families

In order to keep the Minnesota Safe Learning Survey as brief as possible for families, the survey only included one question about learning overall (as opposed to asking about academic and social/emotional skills separately):

To what extent do you believe your student(s) are learning this school year?

Family members responded to this question for each age category their students fell into (early childhood, elementary, middle school / junior high, high school). The most common response for the elementary, middle, and high school age groups was that students were *learning some*. However, for families with students in early childhood education, the most common response was *learning a lot*. Although families with elementary students most commonly reported that students were *learning some*, the second most common response was *learning a lot*, which contrasts with responses from families of middle and high school students, whose second most common response was *learning a little*. This trend of families reporting that younger students appeared to be learning more than secondary students appears to align with the higher proportion of early childhood and elementary students reported to be in an in-person learning model. However, there are many factors that likely impacted families' impressions of their children's learning, so we cannot conclude that mode of learning was the primary or only influence on these estimates.



Families with early childhood and elementary students reported at higher rates that their students were *learning a lot* versus families with secondary students.

Students

Students were also only asked one question about learning overall: **To what extent do you feel you are learning this school year?** Similar to responses from educators and families, students (6th–12th graders) most commonly reported **I’m learning some**. However, in contrast to the trends seen in family reports of secondary student learning (which indicated that students were most often reported to be **learning some or a little**), a little over a quarter of students (27%) selected **I’m learning a lot**. This points to a need to further investigate how each group defined what “learning” means and what types of indicators they used to make those judgments. It will also be critical to eventually compare these learning estimates to objective measures of skill development in various areas, including academics, social and emotional learning, and less commonly measured areas such as technology and media skills.

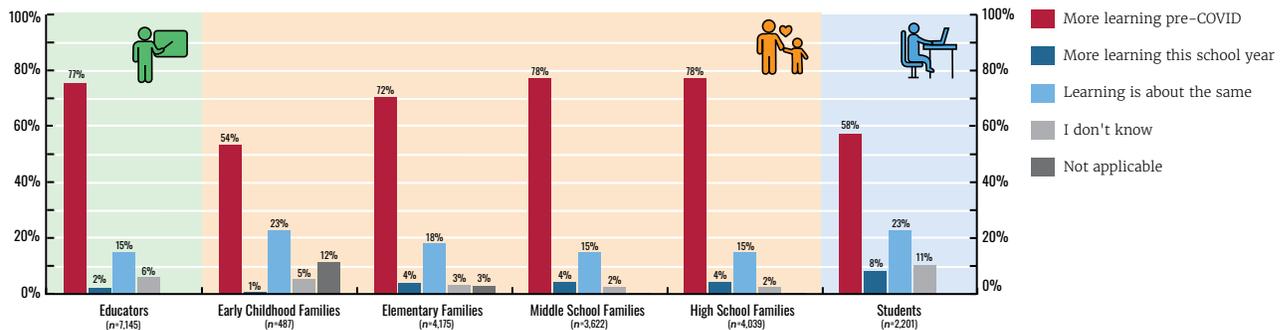


Secondary students were more likely than secondary families to report that they were learning a lot in the fall and winter of 2020-21.

Comparing learning pre-COVID to the first half of the 2020-21 school year

All survey respondents were asked to compare their estimates of the amount of learning happening during the 2020–21 school year (as of February 2021) to learning that occurred “pre-COVID,” or before the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020. Across all respondents, most reported that there was more learning happening before COVID-19 impacted schooling than during the first half of the 2020–21 school year.

How do you believe you / your students’ learning pre-COVID compares to learning this school year?



Educators

Most educators (77%) agreed that there was more learning happening among their students before the COVID-19 pandemic than during the fall and winter of 2020–21. However, 15% reported that the amount of learning is comparable between the two time periods. Other educators indicated that they did not know enough to make this comparison (6%) and very few reported that there was more learning happening in the first half of 2020–21 than pre-COVID (2%).

Families

Family members responded to this question for each age category their students fell into. While most family respondents agreed that there was more learning happening pre-COVID within each age group, there were some notable differences between age group responses. In particular, families with students at the early childhood level were more likely to report that *the amount of learning is about the same* than families reporting about other age groups; 23% of early childhood family respondents indicated that *the amount of learning is about the same*, in contrast to 18% at the elementary level and 15% at both the middle and high school levels. These responses align with family responses about learning overall described above, in which younger children were rated to generally be learning more than secondary students.



Educators, families, and students agreed that more learning occurred pre-COVID.

Students

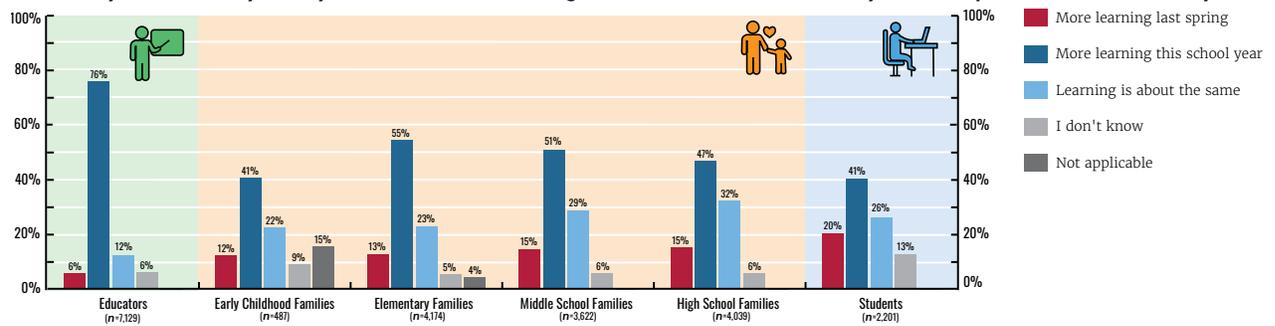
Along with educators and families, just over half of students (58%) also reported that they were learning more pre-COVID than during the first half of the 2020–21 school year. However, students were more likely than educators and secondary parents to report that *the amount of learning is about the same* (23% of students compared to 15% of educators and families with secondary students) or that *there is more learning happening this school year* (8% of students compared to 2% for educators and families with secondary students). As stated in previous sections, it is interesting to note that secondary students' own estimates of their learning tended to be higher than estimates from secondary family respondents.

Comparing learning in spring 2020 to the first half of the 2020–21 school year

In the spring of 2020, schools across MN were thrust into the new and uncertain world of distance learning following the Governor's announcement that all school buildings needed to close by March 18, 2020. Although educators put forth extraordinary efforts to meet students' needs during this unprecedented time, there were many obstacles that impacted their ability to provide a high-quality education to all students (see the [University of Minnesota's Spring 2020 Minnesota PK-12 Distance Learning Survey](#) for more details on educators' experiences during the spring of 2020). As such, we decided to ask respondents to compare their experiences with learning when the pandemic had just begun to the fall and winter of the 2020–21 school year, when there has been more time and experience to inform putting new educational practices in place.

Across all groups, most respondents reported that there was more learning happening during the first half of the 2020–21 school year than during the spring of 2020. However, there were some differences in response patterns, both between and within respondent groups, as described below.

How do you believe you / your students' learning at the end of last school year compares to this school year?



Educators

Most educators (76%) reported that there was more learning happening among their students during the first half of the 2020–21 school year than during the spring of 2020. It is interesting to note that, compared to families and students, a higher proportion of educators reported that more learning happened during the first half of this school year in comparison to the end of last school year.

Families

Similar to the other learning questions, family members responded to this question for each age category their students fell into. Within each age group, the highest proportion of families reported that *there is more learning happening this school year*. The next most common response for families across all age groups was that *the amount of learning is about the same*, though a somewhat higher percentage of high school (32%) and middle school families (29%) reported this compared to families reporting about elementary (23%) and early childhood (22%) students. It is also interesting to note that despite the rapid and dramatic shift to distance learning in spring of 2020, a significant amount of families reported that *there was more learning happening at the end of last school year* (ranging from 12–15% across age groups).



Educators, families, and students agreed that more learning occurred during the fall and winter of this school year compared to the end of last school year.

Students

Although many student respondents shared views with educators and families that there was more learning happening in the fall and winter of 2020–21 than in the spring of 2020 (40%), student responses showed greater variability than those of the other respondents. A total of 26% of students reported that *the amount of learning is about the same*, 20% selected that *there was more learning happening at the end of last school year*, and 13% reported *I don't know*.

Successes & Challenges

The following is a description of how educators, families, and students viewed successes and challenges in the month preceding the survey. All respondents were asked to select three areas that were most successful for them and three areas that were most challenging for them from the same list.

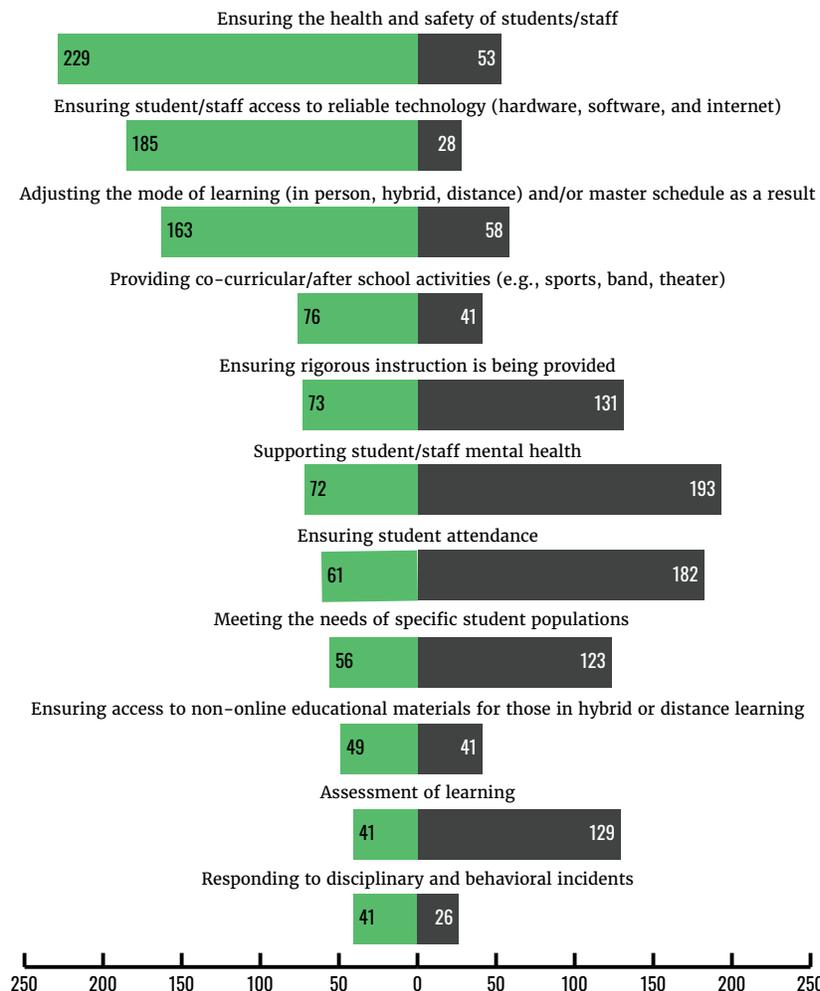
Administrators

Administrators' top three areas of reported success were *ensuring the health and safety of students/staff*, *ensuring student/staff access to reliable technology*, and *adjusting the mode of learning and/or master schedule as a result*. In contrast, the top three areas administrators reported as challenges included *supporting student/staff mental health*, *ensuring student attendance*, and *ensuring rigorous instruction is being provided*.



Administrators: Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=359) ■ Challenging (n=352)



Administrators reported **success with technical activities** (e.g., health and safety protocols, access to reliable technology, adjusting the mode of learning), but **challenges with adaptive activities** (e.g., supporting mental health, ensuring student attendance, ensuring rigorous instruction is provided).

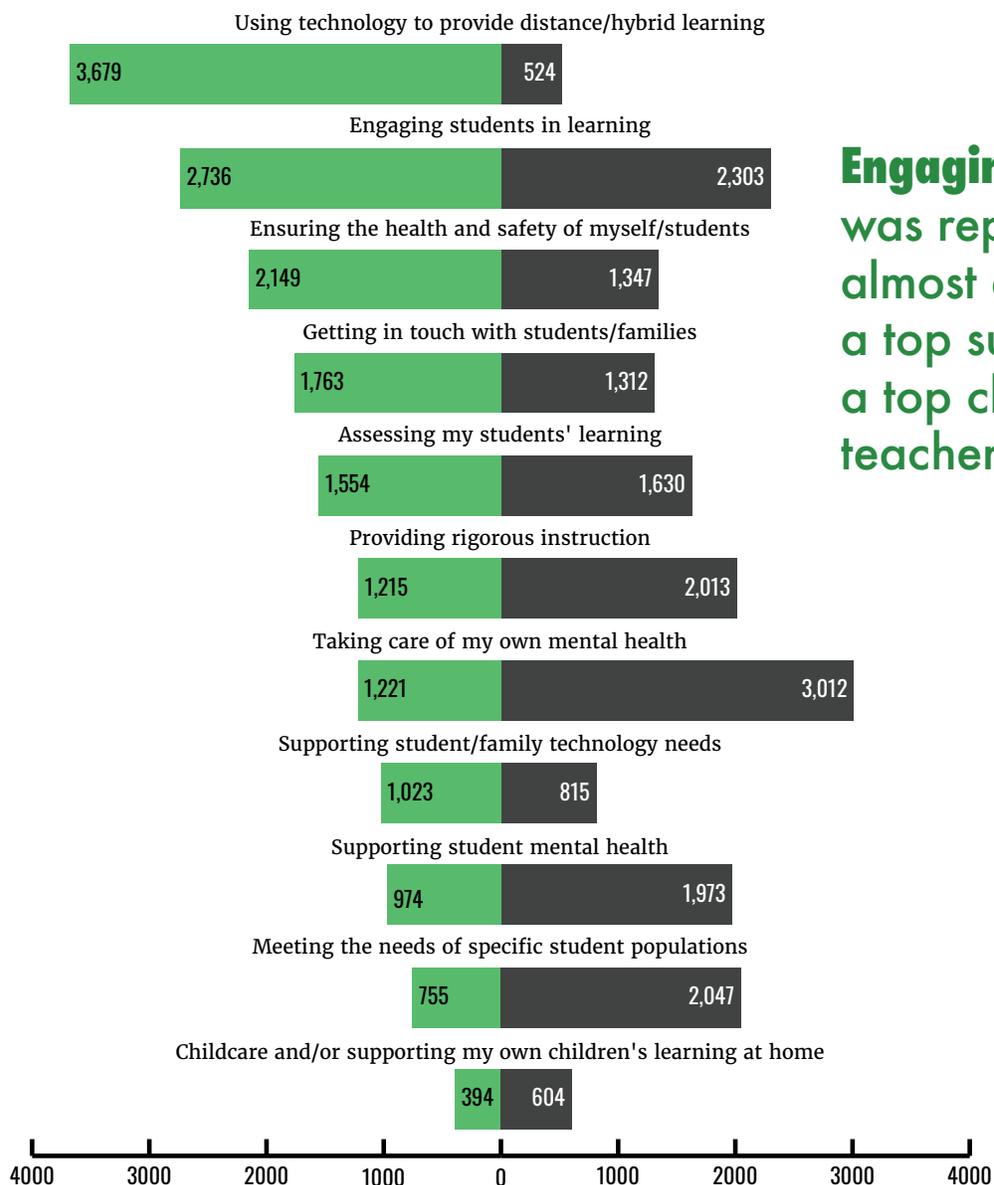
Teachers

For teachers, the top three areas of success were *using technology to provide distance/hybrid learning*, *engaging students in learning*, and *ensuring the health and safety of themself/their students*. The top three challenges teachers reported included *taking care of their own mental health*, *engaging students in learning*, and *meeting the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)*. Interestingly, *engaging students in learning* was ranked second in both successes and challenges.



Teachers: Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=6,118) ■ Challenging (n=6,079)



Engaging students was reported almost equally as a top success and a top challenge by teachers.

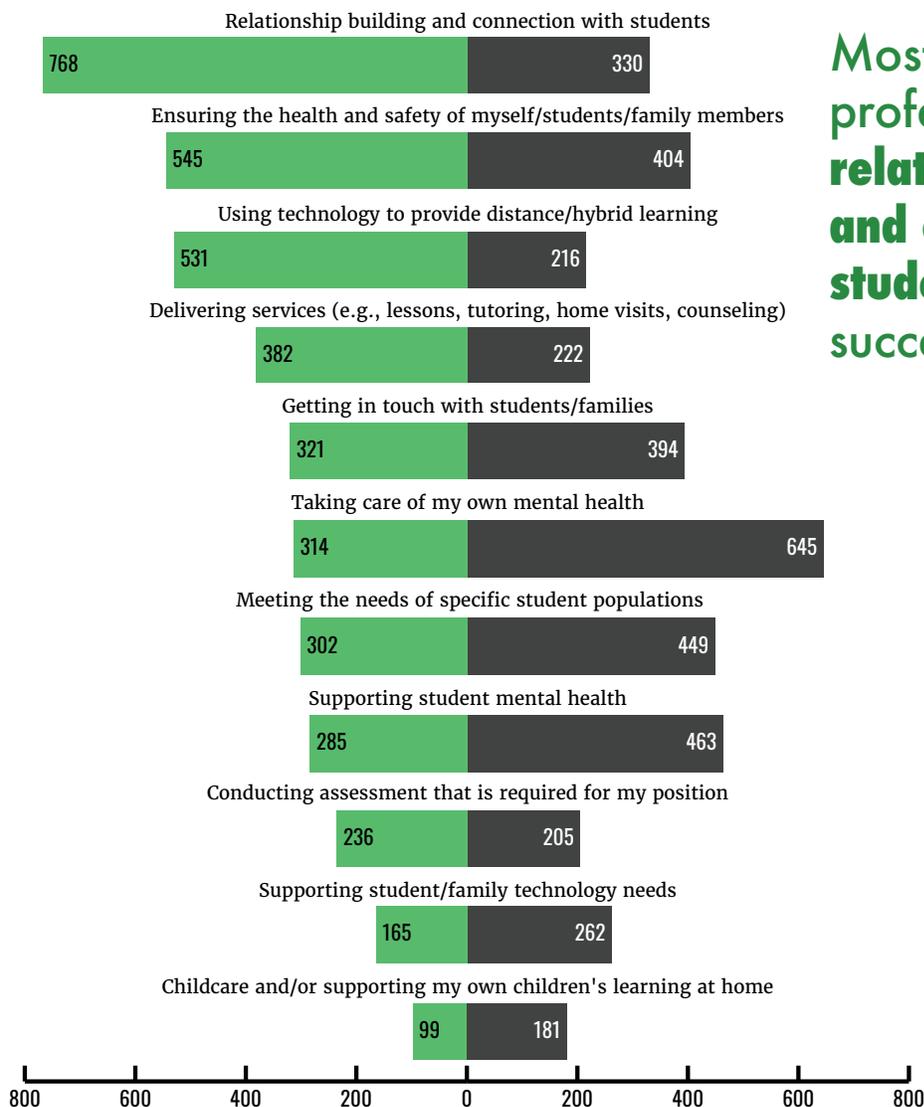
Support professionals

The top three cited successes among support professionals were *relationship building and connection with students, ensuring the health and safety of myself/students/family members, and using technology to provide distance/hybrid learning*. In terms of challenges, the top three responses were *taking care of my own mental health, supporting student mental health, and meeting the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)*.



Support Professionals: Choose 3 areas that were the most successful that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=1,408) ■ Challenging (n=1,362)



Most support professionals reported **relationship building and connection with students** as their top success.



Using technology and ensuring the health and safety of students/staff/families were among the top three successes for administrators, teachers, and support professionals.

The top challenge for teachers and support professionals was **taking care of their own mental health.**

Supporting mental health of students and/or staff was a top challenge for administrators, teachers, and support professionals.

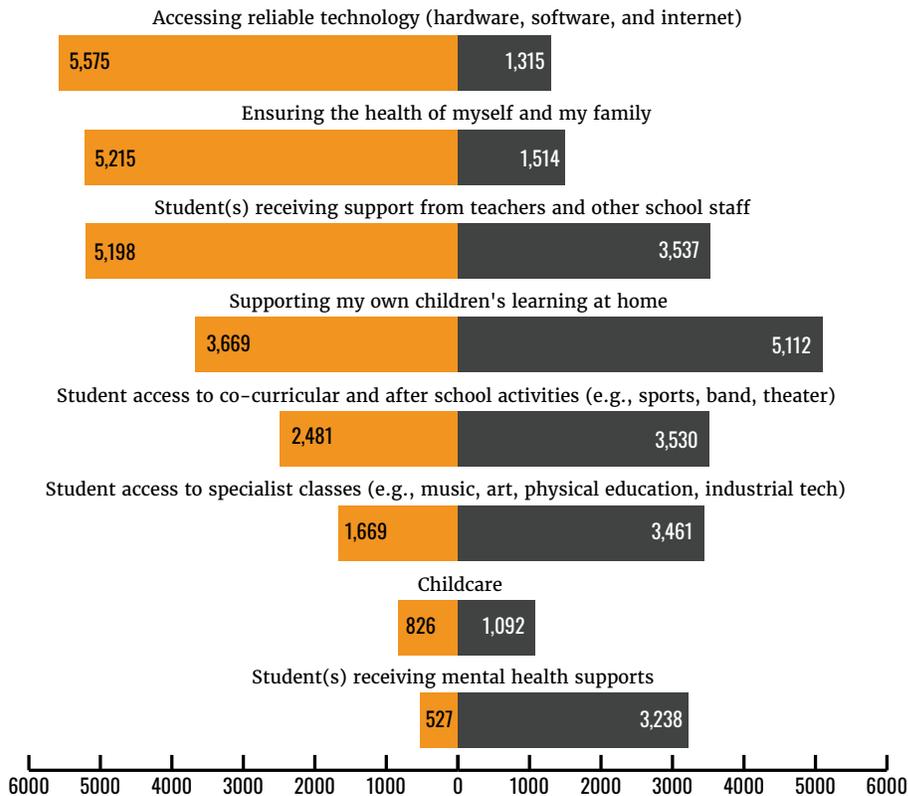
Families

Families' top three areas of success included **accessing reliable technology (hardware, software, and internet)**, **ensuring the health of myself and my family**, and **student(s) receiving support from teachers and other school staff**. The fact that **accessing reliable technology** was the largest success for families is particularly notable, as focus group data collected by WMCC in June of 2020 indicated that this issue was a common source of stress for many families when the pandemic began. Families' top three challenges were **supporting my own children's learning at home**, **student(s) receiving support from teachers and other school staff**, and **student access to co-curricular and after school activities (e.g., sports, band, theater)**. Interestingly, **receiving support from teachers and other school staff** was in the top three most common successes and challenges.



Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

Successful (n=9,683) Challenging (n=8,896)



Receiving support from teachers and other school staff was in families' top three successes and challenges.

Most-reported challenge: supporting their children's learning at home.

In contrast to spring 2020, when it was reported to be a common source of stress among families, **accessing reliable technology** was the most-reported success for families in February 2021.

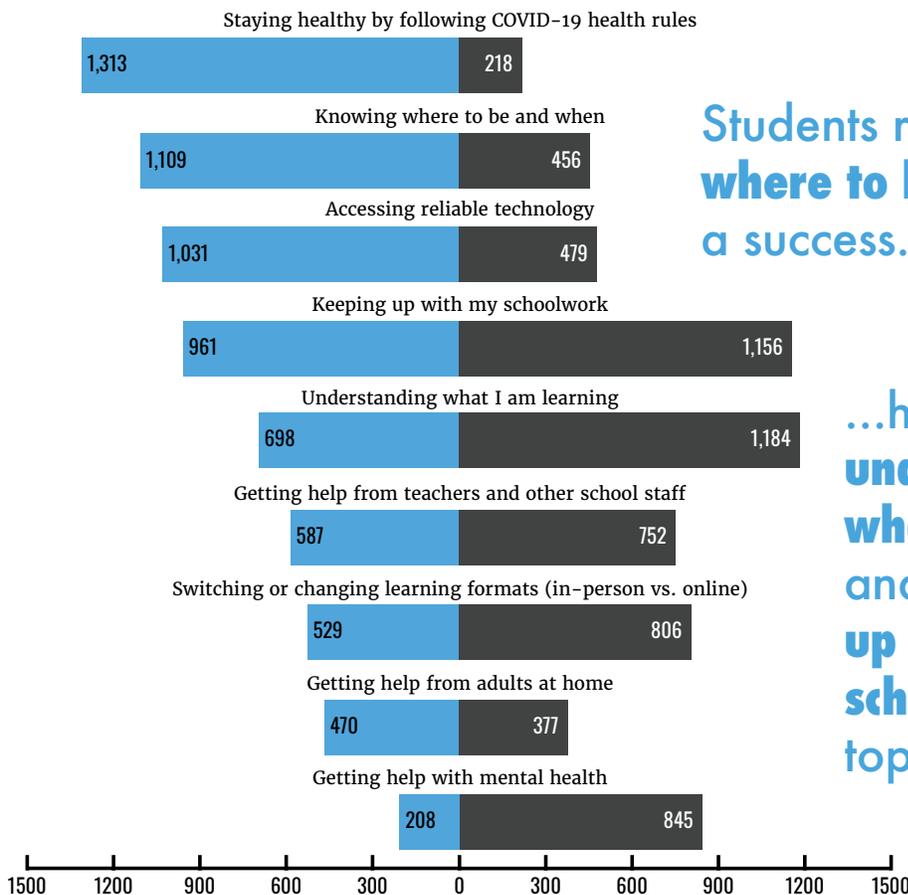
Students

The top three areas of success for students were *staying healthy by following COVID-19 health rules (like wearing a mask, washing hands, not going to school when sick), knowing where to be and when, and accessing reliable technology (like the internet, your computer/iPad, Google classroom, Schoology, etc.)*. In contrast, the top three challenges students reported included *understanding what I am learning, keeping up with my schoolwork, and getting help with mental health (like talking to someone about feeling sad, lonely, mad, or worried)*.



Choose 3 areas that were the most successful and 3 that were the most challenging for you in the past month.

■ Successful (n=2,382) ■ Challenging (n=2,258)



Students reported **knowing where to be and when** as a success.

...however, **understanding what they learned and keeping up with their schoolwork** were top challenges.



Meeting needs of special populations

Educators who selected *meeting the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)* as either a success or a challenge were then prompted to report on which specific populations they experienced successes or challenges with. Overall, 1,101 educators responded to the question about which populations they had successes with and 2,573 educators responded to the question about which populations they experience the most challenges with when trying to engage with and support them. Interestingly, *students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and/or 504 plans* were selected the most frequently for both successes ($n=864$) and challenges ($n=1,848$), followed by *English learners* ($n=313$ for successes and $n=1,198$ for challenges). One hundred and twenty educators selected *early learners* for successes and 247 selected early learners for challenges. *Students experiencing homelessness/high mobility* were selected by only 104 educators for successes and by 741 educators for challenges. The response of *other* was selected by 91 educators for successes and 375 educators for challenges. Finally, *Tribal communities* were the group selected least frequently for both successes ($n=34$) and challenges ($n=131$).



Educators reported experiencing both successes and challenges regarding their ability to meet the needs of students with disabilities and English learners.

COVID-19 related decreases in enrollment

Administrators ($n=354$) were asked to report on the extent to which they were concerned about COVID-19-related decreases in enrollment in their school/district this year. Response options ranged from *not at all concerned* to *very concerned*. Thirty-eight percent of administrators reported they were *very concerned*. A similar percentage of respondents reported that they were *moderately concerned* (26%) or *slightly concerned* (23%). Only 13% reported that they were *not concerned at all*.



64% of administrators were very concerned or moderately concerned about enrollment.

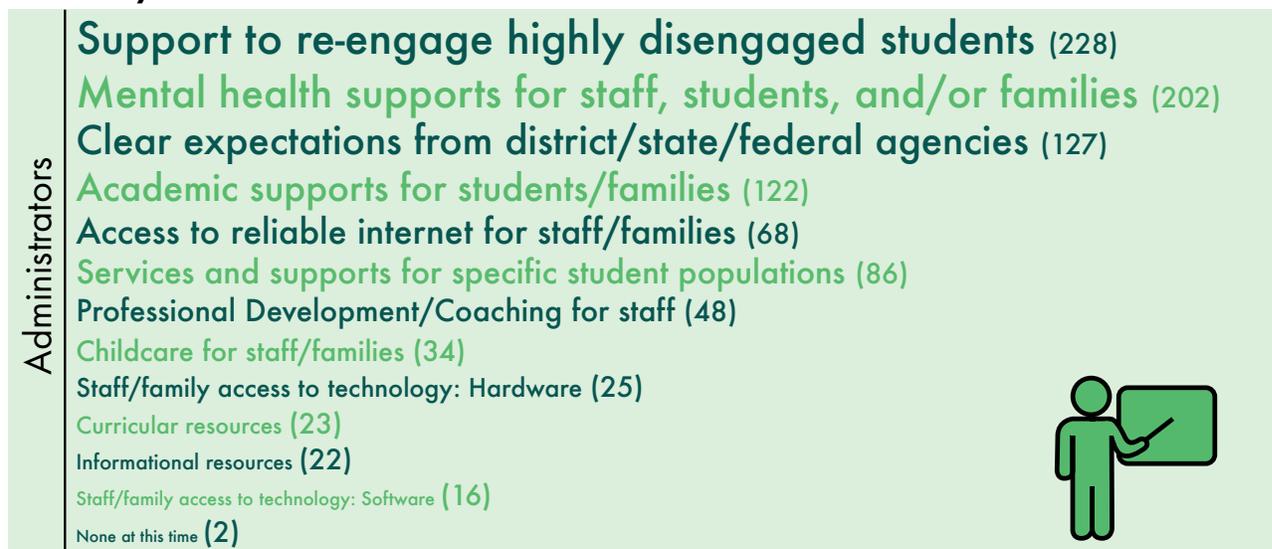
Supports

Administrators

Administrators were asked about the top three supports their school/district needed this school year. Among 352 administrators responding to the question, more than half indicated needing **support to re-engage highly disengaged students** and **mental health supports for staff, students, and/or families**. Administrators also commonly reported needing **clear expectations from district/state/federal agencies, academic supports for students/families, services and supports for specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile), and access to reliable internet for staff/families**. The supports that administrators selected least frequently included needing **professional development/coaching for staff, childcare for staff/families, staff/family access to hardware (e.g., laptops, tablets, etc.), curricular resources (e.g., curricula/lessons adapted for online learning), informational resources (e.g., guidance on how to build relationships virtually, online assessment, etc.), and staff/family access to software (e.g., online lessons, apps, etc.)**. Only 2 administrators reported needing **none at this time**.

More than half of educators in all roles reported needing support to **re-engage highly disengaged students** and needing **mental health support for students, staff, and families**.

What are the top 3 supports that your school/district needs this school year?



Teachers and support professionals

All teachers and support professionals were asked: *What are the top three supports you need to be effective this school year?* Over 7,000 teachers/support professionals responded to this question, with the majority reporting that they needed *a manageable workload* and approximately half reporting that they needed *supports to re-engage highly disengaged students*. *Mental health supports, including support for students/families and themselves*, were the next most

commonly selected options.

Other supports teachers and support professionals

reported needing included *access to reliable internet, services and supports for specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile), academic supports for students/families, and curricular resources (e.g., curricula/lessons adapted for online learning)*. A smaller number of teachers and support professionals reported needing *access to hardware (e.g., computer monitors, document cameras, etc.), clear grading expectations, access to software (e.g., online curricula, software subscriptions, etc.), informational resources (e.g., guidance on how to build relationships virtually, online assessment, etc.), and professional development/coaching*. Only 259 educators reported needing *no supports at this time*.

Perhaps not surprising given the multiple modes of teaching/learning, the top needed support among teachers and support professionals was **a more manageable workload.**

What are the top 3 supports that you need to be effective this school year?

Teachers / Support Professionals	Manageable workload (4,693)
	Supports to re-engage highly disengaged students (3,577)
	Mental health supports for students and their families (1,946)
	Mental health supports for myself (1,534)
	Access to reliable internet (1,443)
	Services and supports for specific student populations (1,433)
	Academic supports for students/families (1,416)
	Curricular resources (1,321)
	Access to technology: hardware (867)
	Clear grading expectations (684)
	Access to technology: software (608)
	Informational resources (362)
Professional development / coaching (352)	
None at this time (259)	

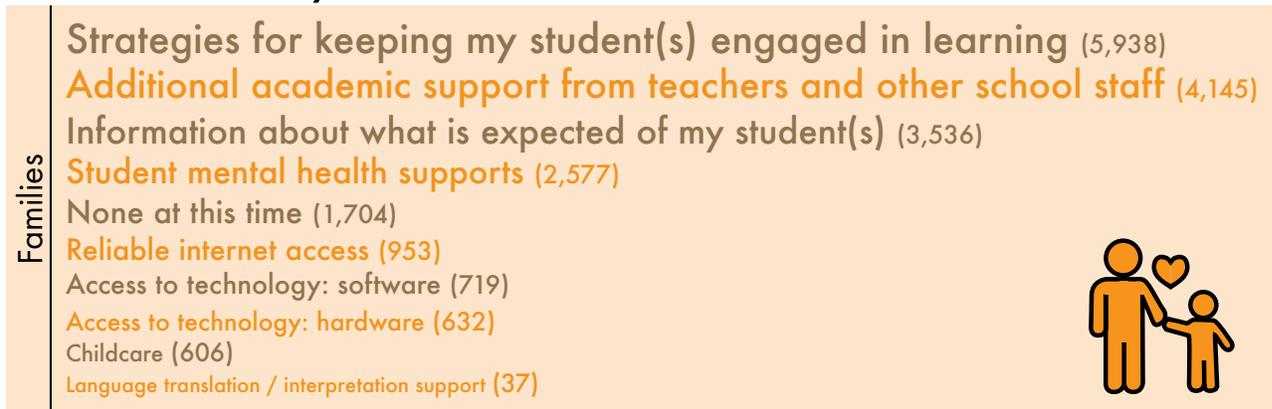




Families

Families were asked about the top three supports they needed for their student(s) to learn this school year. Over 9,400 families responded to this question with respect to their students' overall needs if they had more than one student. More than half indicated that they needed **strategies for keeping their student(s) engaged in learning**. Other supports families commonly reported needing included **additional academic support from teachers and other school staff**, **information about what is expected of student(s)**, and **student mental health supports**. Some families reported needing **technology support, including access to reliable internet, access to software (e.g., online lessons, apps, etc.)**, and **access to hardware (e.g., laptops, tablets, etc.)**. Finally, the least common supports families reported needing included **childcare** and **language translation/interpretation support**, and some families (n=1,704) reported needing **no supports at this time**.

What are the top 3 supports that you need for your student(s) to learn this school year?

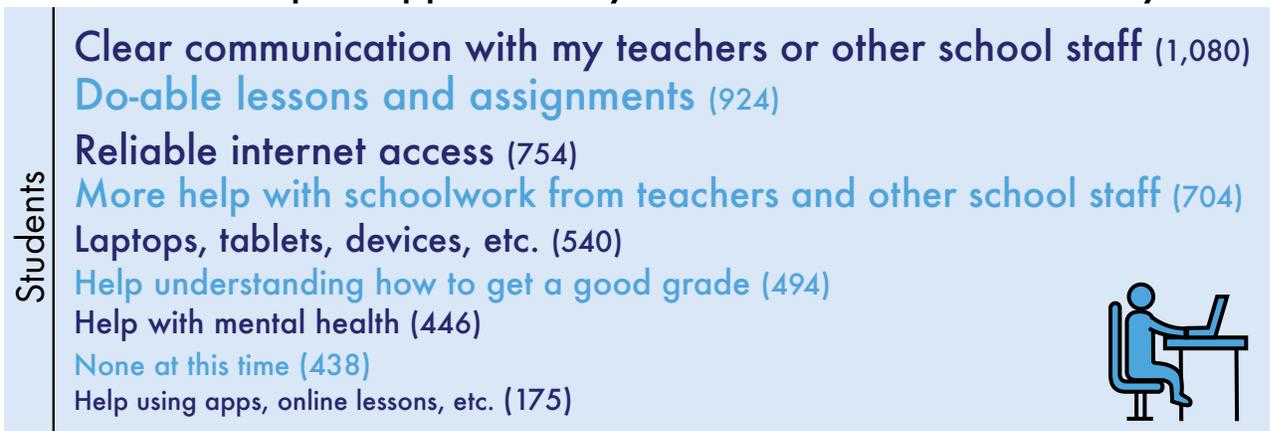


Families reported that they most needed support with **keeping their students engaged in learning**.

Students

Finally, students were asked about the top three things they need in order to learn this school year with the option to select three of nine possible options. A total of 2,300 students across grades 6 through 12 responded to this question. Nearly half of respondents reported needing *clear communication with their teachers or other school staff* and needing *doable lessons and assignments*. Many students also indicated that they needed *reliable internet; more help with schoolwork from teachers and other school staff; laptops, tablets, devices, etc.; help understanding how to get a good grade, and help with mental health (like talking to someone about feeling sad, lonely, or worried)*. Only a small group of students reported needing *help using apps, online lessons, etc.* or reported needing *no supports at this time*.

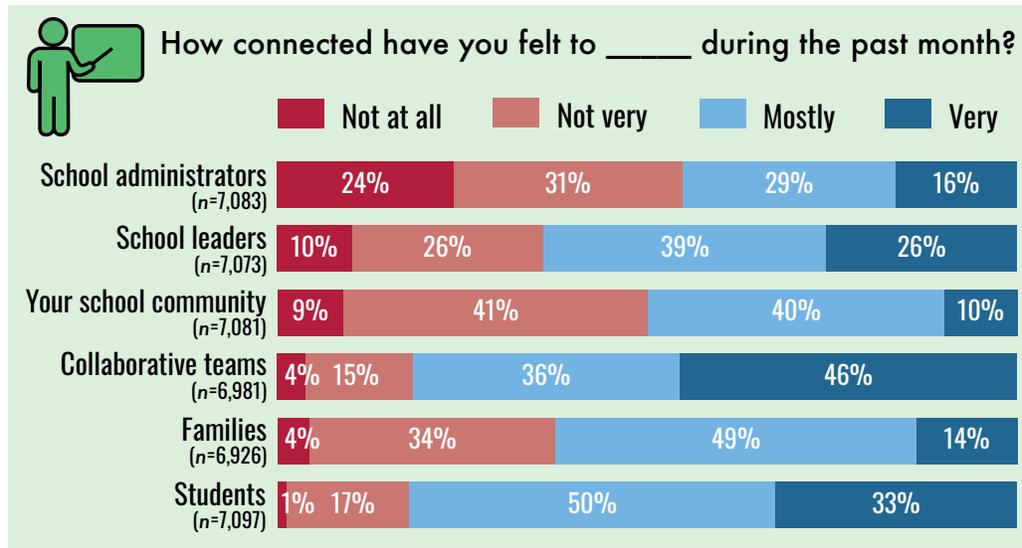
What are the top 3 supports that you need to learn this school year?



Students needed **clearer communication with their teachers or other school staff** as well as **doable lessons and assignments**.

Connectedness

Educators, families, and students were asked to rate how connected they felt to various individuals or entities relating to school. Overall, connectedness for educators, families, and students varied depending on who or what they were being asked about.



Educators

Educators felt most connected to their students and collaborative teams (e.g., PLCs, departments, or grade level teams), with 82% reporting feeling **mostly** or **very connected** in both cases. Educators reported moderate connections to school leaders (26% **very connected**, 38% **mostly connected**, and 26% **not very connected**) and families (49% **mostly connected** and 34% **not very connected**). The lowest levels of connectedness for educators were in regards to the school community (40% **mostly connected** and 41% **not very connected**) and district administrators (29% **mostly connected**, 31% **not very connected**, 24% **not at all connected**).

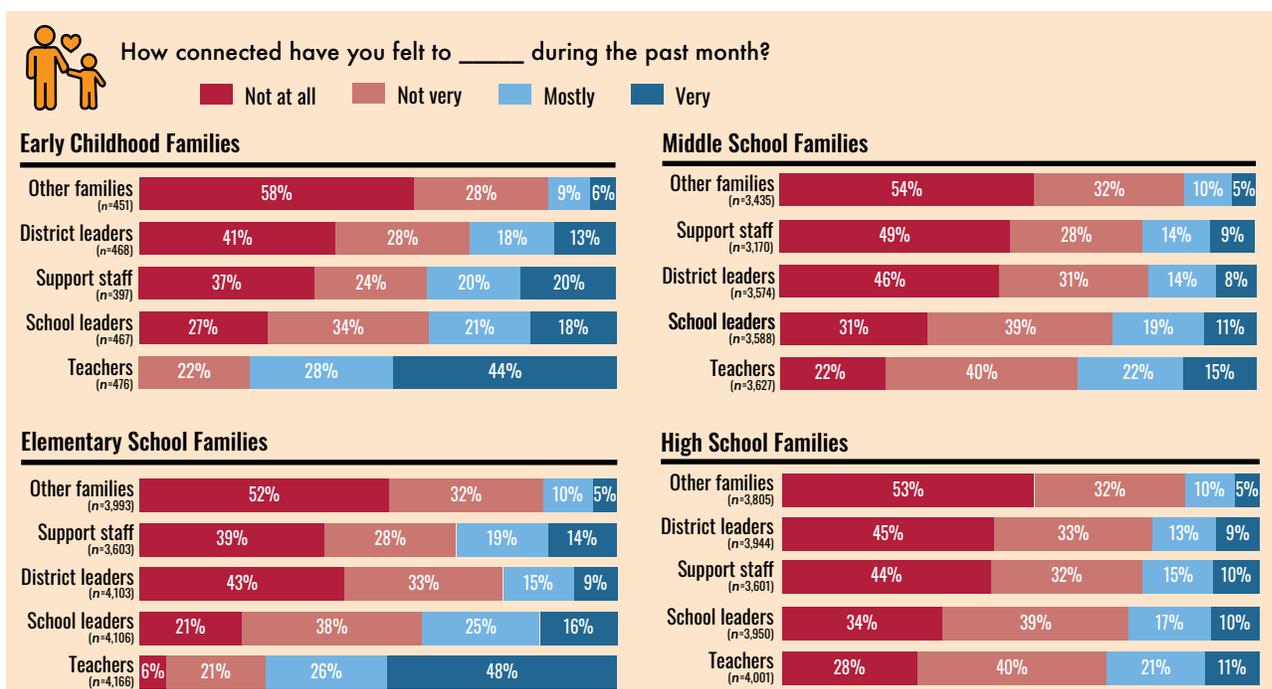
Educators felt most connected with their **collaborative teams** and their **students**.

Families

Families across grade levels demonstrated similar trends in lacking connectedness to district and school leaders, support professionals, and other families. The percentage of families who reported feeling **not at all** or **not very connected** to district leaders ranged from 69% in early childhood to 78% in high school. Similarly, the percentage of families who reported feeling **not at all** or **not very connected** to support staff ranged from 61% in early childhood to 76% in middle and high school. For school leaders, the percentage of families who reported feeling **not at all** or **not very connected** ranged from 59% in elementary school to 73% in high school. Families felt the lowest level of connectedness with other families, with 84% of high school families reporting feeling **not at all** or **not very connected** to other families and 86% of early childhood families reporting feeling **not at all** or **not very connected** to other families.

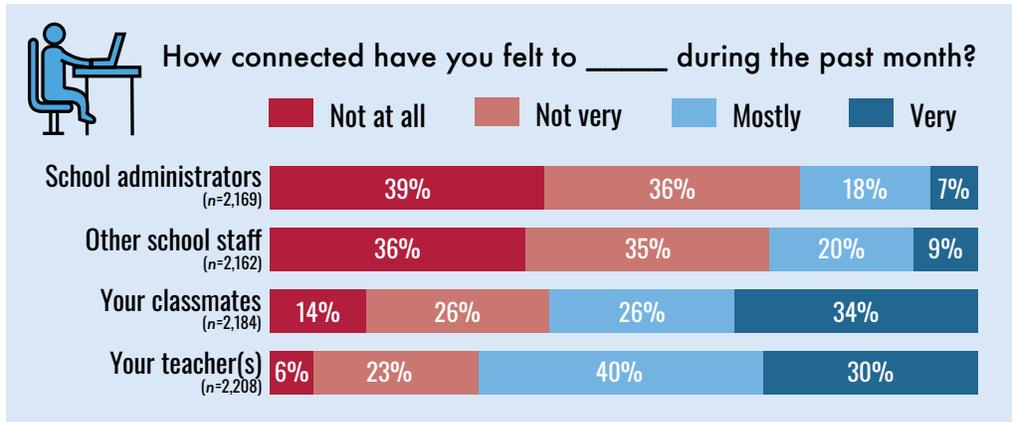
Early childhood and elementary school families felt more connected to their student(s)' teachers than middle and high school families.

However, families across grade levels showed different patterns with regard to connectedness to teachers. Perhaps not surprisingly, families at lower grade levels felt more connected to their students' teachers than families at higher grade levels. For example, 71% of families with students in early childhood reported feeling **mostly** or **very connected** to their students' teachers and 74% of families with students in elementary school reported feeling **mostly** or **very connected** to their students' teachers. In comparison, only 37% of families with students in middle school felt **mostly** or **very connected** to their students' teachers and only 32% of families with students in high school felt **mostly** or **very connected** to their students' teachers.



Students

Students felt more connected to their teachers and classmates rather than their school administrators and other school staff. Seventy-one percent of students felt **mostly** or **very connected** to their teachers and 61% felt **mostly** or **very connected** to their classmates. Seventy-five percent felt **not at all** or **not very connected** to school administrators and 71% felt **not at all** or **not very connected** to other school staff.



Most students felt **mostly** or **very** connected with their **teachers and classmates**.

Families felt the **least** connected with **other families** and most connected with **teachers**.

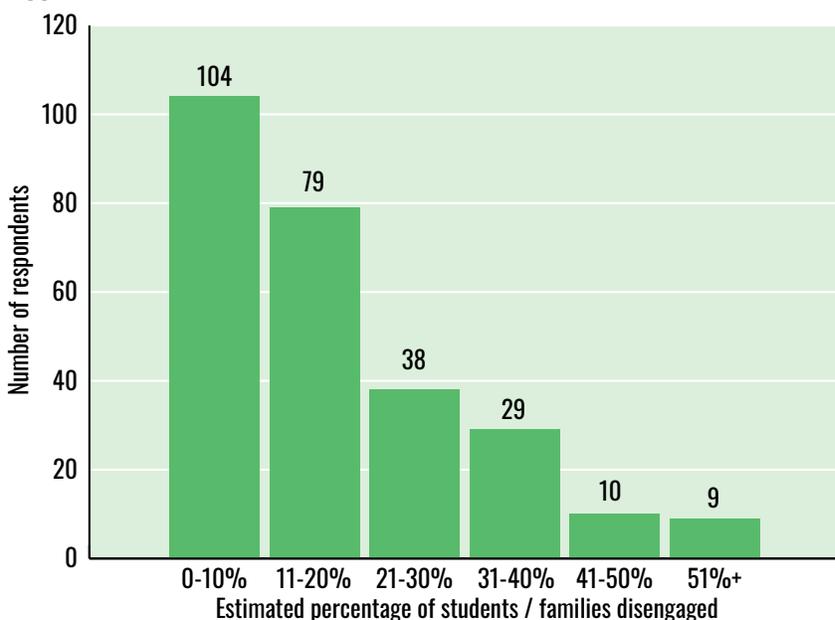
Communication

Percentage of students/families who have been disengaged

Administrators were asked: *What percentage of your students/families have been disengaged from classes/school this school year?* Among the 269 administrators who responded to this question, the average percentage of students/families that administrators perceived disengaged from classes/school this year was about 20%, with a standard deviation of 15% and a range from 0% to 90%. The majority of administrators ($n=183$) reported that 0–20% of students/families were disengaged and only 9 administrators reported that more than half (51–90%) of students/families were disengaged.



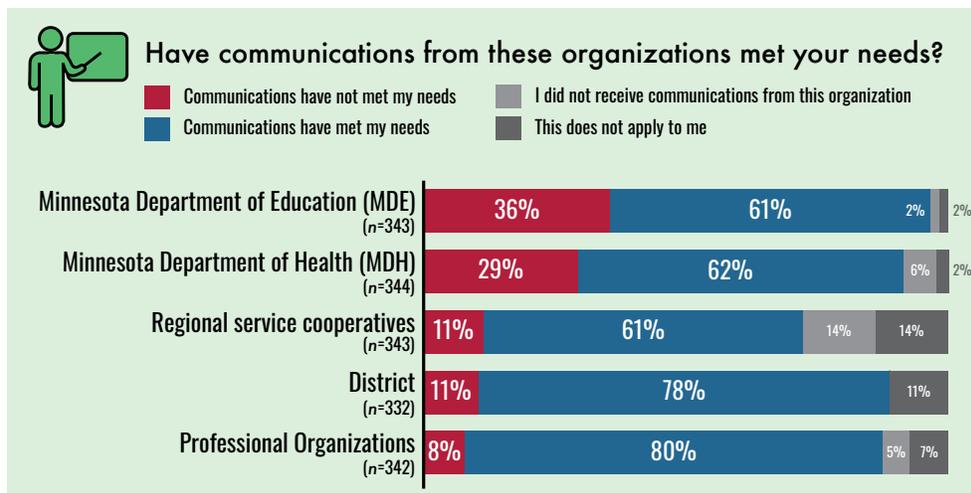
Administrators: What percentage of students/families in your school/district would you estimate has been disengaged from classes/school this school year?



Most administrators reported that between **0% and 20%** of students/families were disengaged from classes/school.

Rate whether communication has met your needs

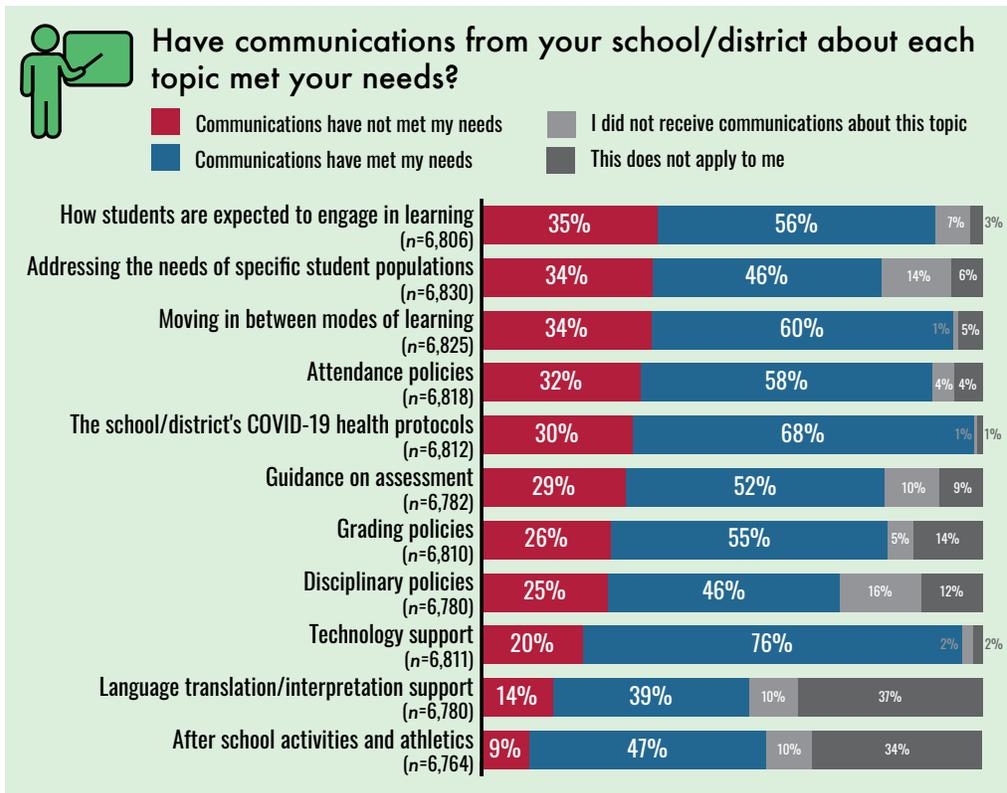
Administrators were asked whether communication from 5 sources met their needs. According to administrators, communication from their district, regional service cooperatives, the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), the Minnesota Department of Health (MDH), and professional organizations was received and largely met their needs. Specifically, 80% of administrators reported that communication from professional organizations met their needs and 78% of administrators reported that communication from their district met their needs. Although fewer administrators reported that communication from other sources met their needs, the majority reported that it did, with 62% of administrators agreeing that MDH communication met their needs and 61% percent reporting that communication from MDE and the regional service cooperatives met their needs.



Teachers and support professionals reported on whether communication from their school/district around 11

Administrators reported that communication from state agencies and local professional organizations generally met their needs.

distinct topics met their needs. **Technology support (hardware, software, and internet access)** was the area with the highest percentage of educators (76%) reporting that communication met their needs. This was followed by **the school/district's COVID-19 health protocols** (68%); **moving in between modes of learning (in-person, hybrid, distance)**, (60%); **attendance policies** (58%); **how students are expected to engage in learning** (56%); **grading policies** (55%); and **guidance on assessment** (52%). Less than half of educators reported that communication in the remaining areas met their needs: **after school activities and athletics** (47%), **disciplinary policies** (46%), **addressing the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless/highly mobile)**, (46%); and **language translation/interpretation support** (39%).



There were two areas in which about a third of educators reported that such communication was not relevant: *language translation/interpretation support* (37%) and *school activities and athletics* (34%).

Communication directly related to teaching and learning (i.e., health protocols, attendance and grading policies, switching modes of learning) met most **teachers'** and **support professionals'** needs.

Families were asked whether 13 areas of communication from their school/district had met their needs. There were similar trends in the communication that met families' needs across grade levels.

For example, families across grade levels tended to report the following communication topics as not relevant to them: *accessing language translation/interpretation support, accessing non-instructional services (e.g., meal services/food shelves, health services, childcare, homeless shelters), addressing the needs of specific student populations (e.g., students who are English Learners, receiving special education services, homeless and highly mobile, etc.), after school activities and athletics, and transportation.*

There were also a few areas in which families at all age levels consistently reported that communication either did not meet their needs or that they did not receive communication on that topic, including *how to support my student(s)' social, emotional, and mental health needs*

and *how I can help my student(s) with schoolwork*. Additionally, it is notable that early childhood and elementary families demonstrated a trend of more frequently reporting satisfaction with communication across most topics than families with secondary students.

Families' needs tended to be met in the remaining communication areas, including *grading policies, how students are expected to engage in learning, how to get help for my student(s) with schoolwork, moving between modes of learning (in-person, hybrid, distance), technology support (hardware, software, and internet access), and the school/district's COVID-19 health protocols*.

Families' communication needs were largely met, especially for those with early childhood and elementary students. However, families reported somewhat less satisfaction with communication about how they could support their students with schoolwork and with social, emotional, and mental health needs.

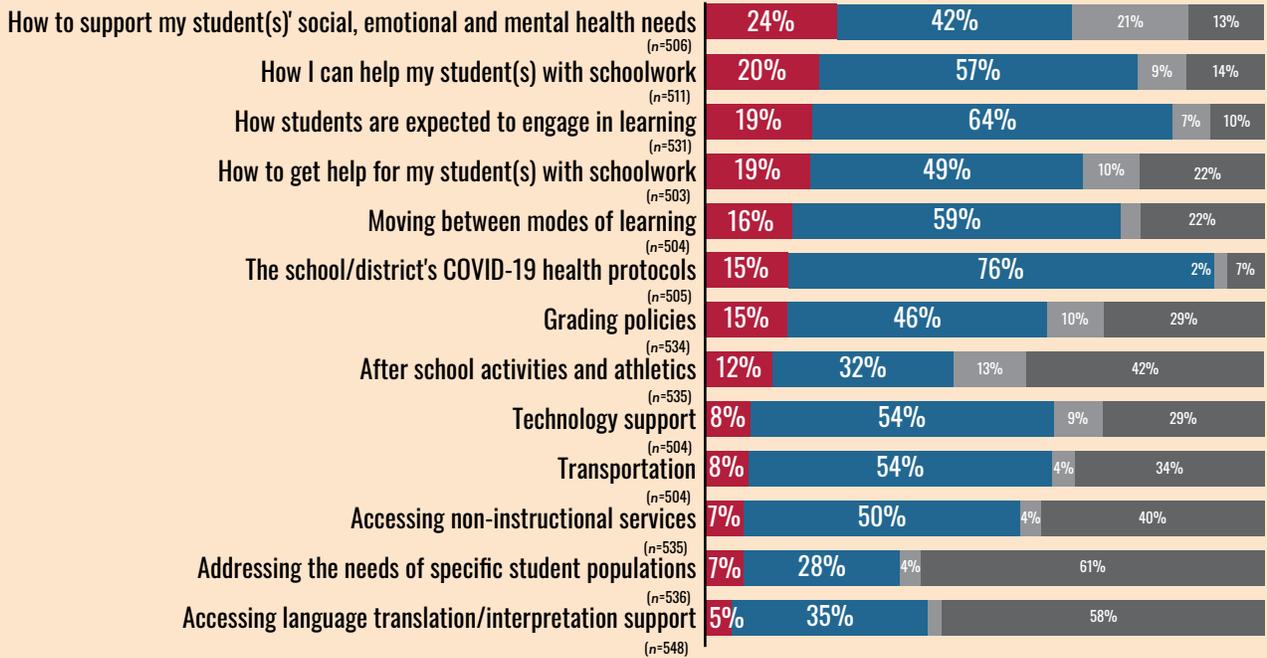
(See pages 38-39 for detailed response rates from family members; text continues on page 40.)



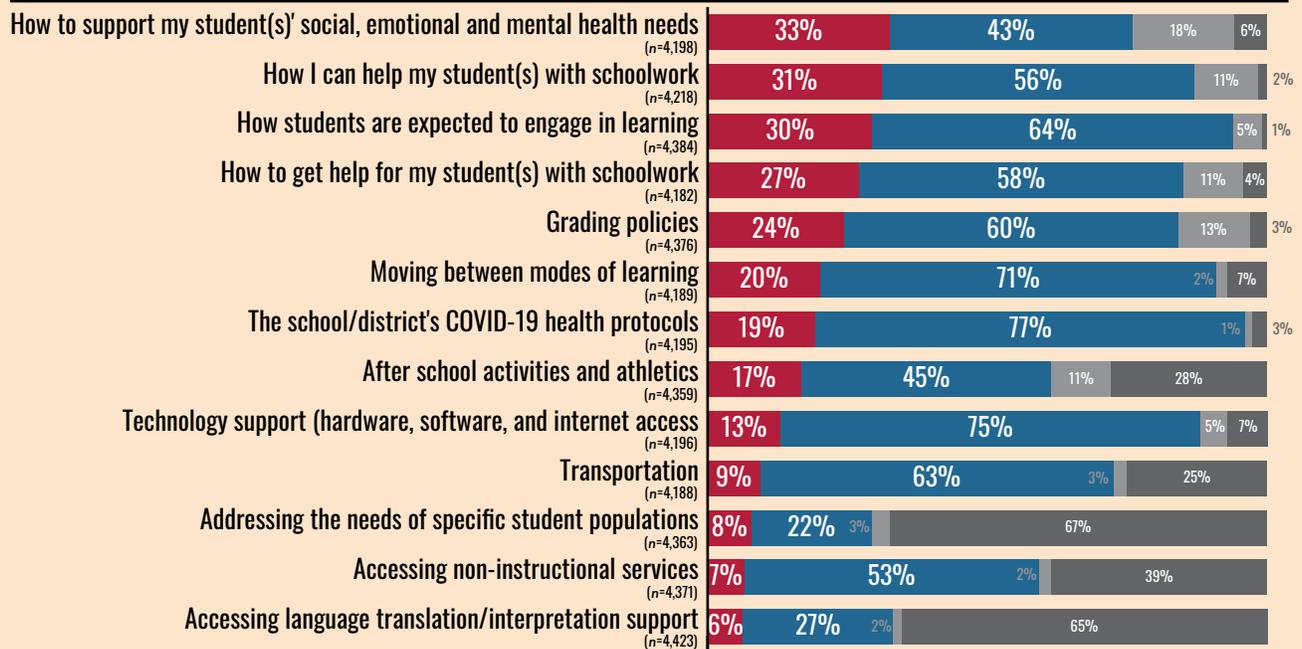
Have communications from your school/district about each topic met your needs?

- Communication has not met my needs
- Communication has met my needs
- I did not receive communication about this
- This does not apply to me/my family

Early Childhood Families



Elementary School Families

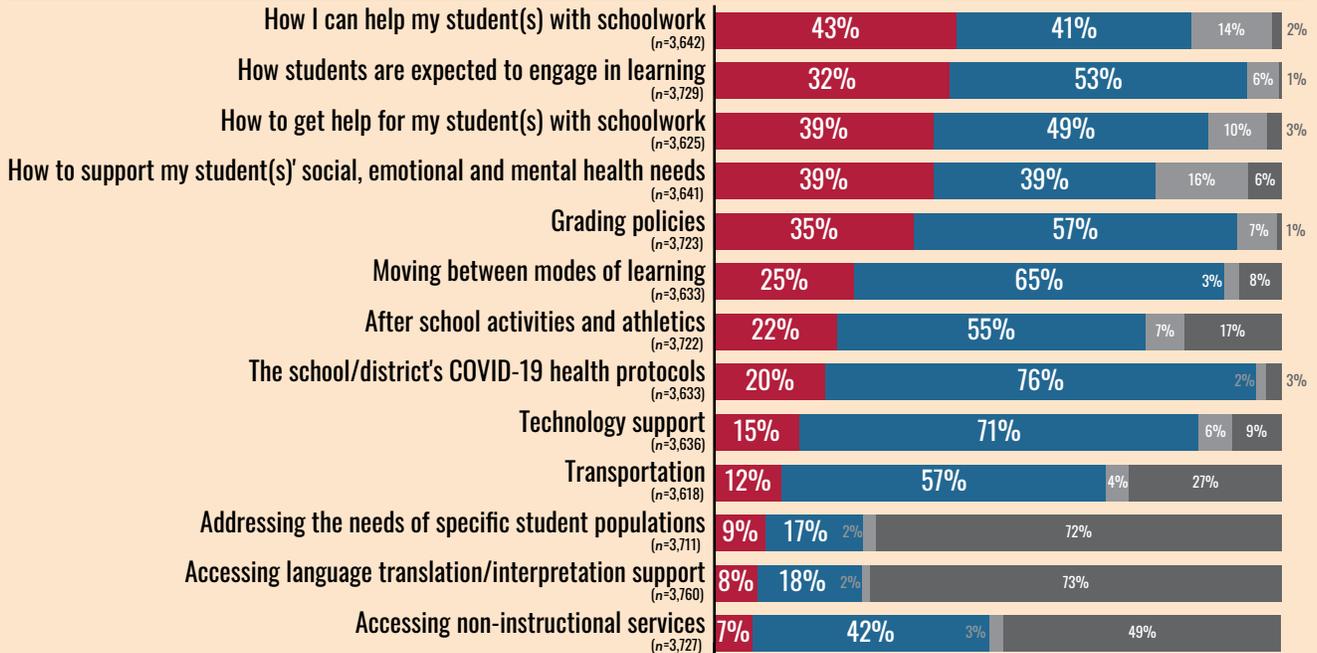




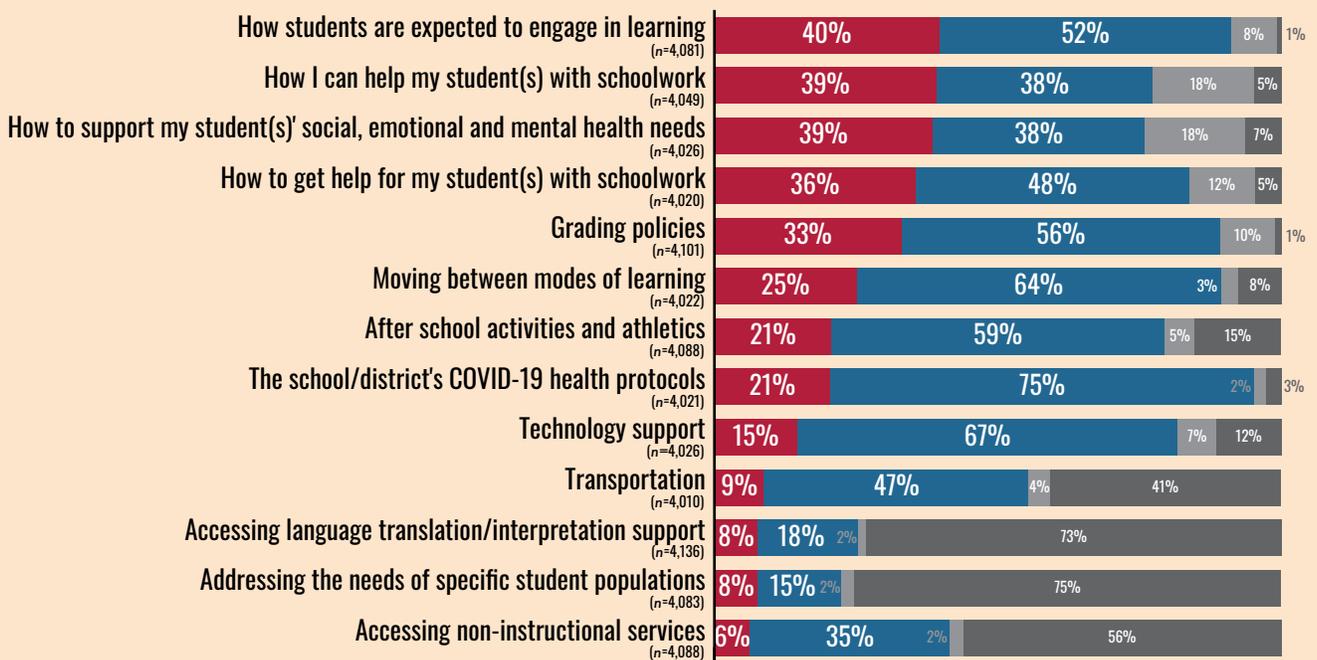
Have communications from your school/district about each topic met your needs?

- Communication has not met my needs
- Communication has met my needs
- I did not receive communication about this
- This does not apply to me/my family

Middle School Families



High School Families



Knowing what to do each day and seeking help

Students were asked three separate questions relating to communication: (a) *Do you know what you are supposed to do for school each day?* (b) *Do you know how to get help if you need it (e.g., help completing assignments, talking to a counselor)?* and (c) *Are your teachers and other school staff available to you when you need help?*

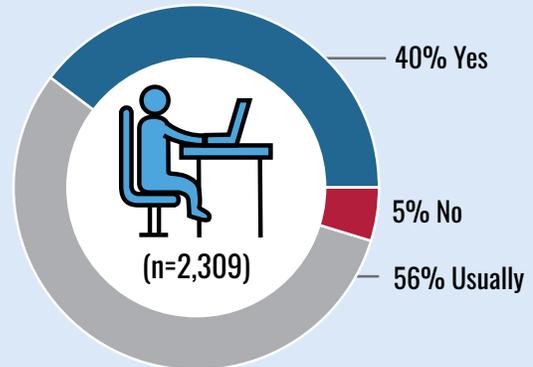
When asked if they know what they are supposed to do for school each day, many students responded **yes** (40%), a few responded **no** (5%), and a majority reported that they **usually** know what to do each day (56%).

Importantly, the majority of students (57%) reported that **yes**, they do know how to get help, with 10% reporting **no**, and 33% reporting **usually**.

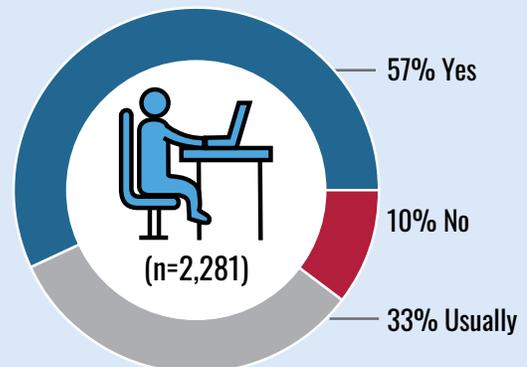
Finally, 34% of students reported that **yes**, teachers or other school staff are available when they need help, with 8% reporting **no**. Over half of the student respondents (58%) reported that teachers and staff are **usually** available to help them.

Overall, **90% or more** students shared they knew what to do for school each day, understood how to get help, and had help available to them.

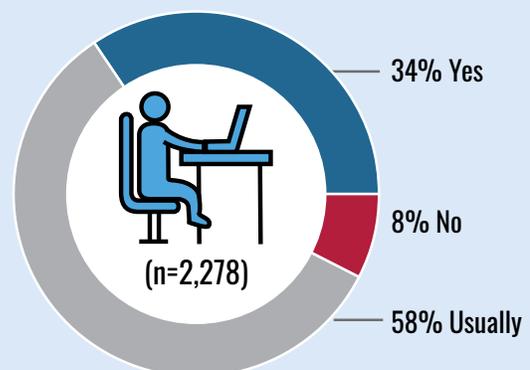
Do you know what you are supposed to do for school each day?



Do you know how to get help if you need it?



Are your teachers and other school staff available to you when you need help?





Closing thoughts

Educators, students, and families across Minnesota spent a majority of the first half of the 2020–21 school year moving in and out of various learning models in response to local COVID-19 rates, with many schools shifting to hybrid or in-person learning by February of 2021. These survey data were collected at a time when respondents had experienced unique and changing learning models for over half a school year (not to mention the multiple months spent in distance learning in spring of 2020). Responses reflect the fact that successes were experienced in multiple areas; however, the school year thus far has been far from easy and many supports are still needed.

Four themes emerged from the survey responses. First, educators, families, and students believed that students did learn during the first half of this school year, though likely to a lesser extent than during a typical year. Second, the pandemic and resulting circumstances (e.g., job loss, child care challenges, school building closures, general disruption to daily life, etc.) have taken a heavy toll on students' and educators' mental health and supports are needed in this area. Third, engaging students in learning was incredibly challenging, but also equally rewarding when it occurred. Last, respondents agreed that they generally experienced successes related to using and accessing technology and ensuring health and safety of students and staff. These results not only demonstrate the complex and difficult nature of schooling during a pandemic, but can also be used to inform action planning for state and local educational leaders. It is our hope that results from this survey and subsequent iterations of the Minnesota Safe Learning Survey (planned for May and October of 2021) will continue to both describe the landscape of education during this challenging time, but also inform next steps in the recovery and redesign of Minnesota's educational systems.

We sincerely thank the educators, families, and students who took the time to complete the survey. The information you shared will be used to directly inform leaders' decisions about supports needed in education across the state.

The MN Safe Learning Survey will be distributed again in May 2021 and October 2021. We hope all of Minnesota's educational leaders will help in distributing subsequent surveys to educators, families, and students in their district or school.

District and charter school reports for each data collection period are available to superintendents or charter leaders upon request.

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